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Bluestar's POV

[image]

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here, beneath the Highrock, for a Clan meeting."

Bluestar's summons rang throughout the camp as ThunderClan cats joined together to listen to what their leader had to say.

"I have decided to take a patrol and journey into the large Twolegplace," Bluestar announced. "There is a cat I must speak to, but I wish for others to accompany me. And, of course, I will need a guide, seeing as I cannot navigate Twolegplace without getting lost."

Yowls of protest erupted from the gathered Clan. "Why are you leaving us?" Mousefur called.

It was Goldenflower who answered. "Whatever it is that Bluestar needs for her to speak with a cat in Twolegplace, she has no reason to have to justify herself. We must trust Bluestar's judgement and remain loyal to her no matter what happens."

Bluestar flashed the golden tabby queen a grateful glance. Goldenflower sat down again, bending her head to lick the ruffled fur on her belly - already swollen with kits.

"The cats I would like to take with me are: Whitestorm, Willowpelt, Longtail, Tigerclaw, Graystripe, Fireheart, Brackenpaw, and Cinderpaw." Her gaze scanned the Clan. "I understand that Tigerclaw is Clan deputy, and I am taking him with me. But I trust that Goldenflower will do a rather excellent job at looking after the Clan and sorting the patrols while we are away. Yellowfang, will you help her?"

The old medicine cat dipped her head to the leader of her adopted Clan. "Yes, Bluestar."

"Very well, then," Bluestar meowed. "It is settled."

She leaped down from the Highrock, signaling with her tail for her patrol to follow her. The Clan was silent as they headed toward the entrance. Finally, the silence was broken.

"Goodbye, Bluestar!" Frostfur called.

"Safe travels!"

Runningwind added, "Come home safely!"

Fireheart and Graystripe rounded up their excited apprentices and followed the majestic blue-gray she-cat out of the camp.

As they continued walking, Bluestar was aware of her companions' alertness. She heard Longtail mutter something, but couldn't make at what he said.

"Who are we going to see?" Cinderpaw asked, unable to hide her excitement.

Bluestar glanced over her shoulder at the smokey-gray apprentice. "We're going to see a kittypet called Nutmeg," she replied.

Cinderpaw nodded. Then she asked another question. "What does she look like?"

"She's a brown tabby," responded Bluestar. "with amber eyes. Her paws, tail-tip, muzzle, and underbelly and chest fur are white."

Bluestar looked back at Cinderpaw again, noticing Fireheart stiffen beside his apprentice. A look of fear and horror filled his forest-green eyes.

"Why are you scared, Fireheart?" Longtail taunted. "Are you gonna run back to your Twolegs like a terrified little kittypet?"

Bluestar remained silent, waiting to hear Fireheart's response. She secretly liked this kind of thing, sharp and truthful retorts; but there was none, only the orange warrior's fear-scent.

Fireheart's POV

'Why can't Longtail just pick on some other cat?' Fireheart thought scornfully. 'Just because kittypets have a different, softer, easier way of life, doesn't mean they're not cats with feelings. Besides, the life of a kittypet is harder than Clan cats think.'

"Fireheart." Graystripe's mew brought him back to the present. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Fireheart lied. He think he failed to convince Graystripe of it, why would he believe it? Fireheart didn't even believe himself.

He lost himself in his thoughts once more. 'I only know one Nutmeg - my mother. But she went insane. She lost it. Everything. . . . .'

He continued to think about what Nutmeg might do if she recognized him as her son, Rusty. Looking up, he saw Bluestar staring at him expectantly. Then realized she had spoken to him.

"I'm sorry, what?" Fireheart asked.

Bluestar looked annoyed, but slightly concerned. "I said," she repeated. "Can you lead the way to Nutmeg from here?"

Fireheart nodded, aware of himself trembling. He hoped it wasn't visible. He led them to a Twoleg den. Jumping up on the fence, he tasted the air. Nutmeg's scent was stale. He leaped off it and landed on his paws.

"Nutmeg's scent is around two days told, but the trail goes this way." He pointed to a dark alleyway, waiting patiently for Bluestar's response.

"Lead the way, then."

They came up to the alleyway, and Fireheart began searching for his old collar. Not the one Longtail tore off, though. Finding it, he

struggled to get it on.

"Are you pretending to be a kittypet?" Brackenpaw asked.

"Kittypet collars don't have dog teeth, or blood on them," Willowpelt pointed out.

"Is that YOUR collar?" Longtail sneered.

Fireheart looked Longtail in the eyes. "Yes," he replied. "This is my collar."

"Why does it have blood and teeth on it?" asked Whitestorm, looking genuinely curious.

"Because it's a BloodClan collar," he answered, growing uncomfortable with all the questions.

"BloodClan," Tigerclaw echoed thoughtfully.

Fireheart became serious. "Listen," he began, "don't say a word. If a cat here asks your name, give them your name but nothing more." He paused. "Don't let the smell fear. Don't put a paw out of line. These cats will kill if their leader tells them to."

Fireheart shot a glace over his shoulder. His green eyes hardened.

"It's kill or be killed," he finished.

"Well, well, well," a voice meowed. "Look who's back."

"Snipe," Fireheart meowed with a curt nod of his head.

Snipe narrowed his eyes. "Why have you come back?"

"Why do I need to explain myself to you?" Fireheart retorted.

Snipe backed away in response, leaving Fireheart to look at a black-and-white tom in the eyes - which were menacing amber.

"Bone." He dipped his head to the BloodClan deputy respectfully.

"You came back," Bone remarked.

"Yes, I did." Fireheart stared at the large tom.

"What brings you back, Rusty?" Bone emphasized his kittypet name.

Fireheart could see Cinderpaw open her mouth to correct Bone out of the corner of his eye. His swept his tail silently over her mouth.

"We need to speak with Scourge," he finally answered.

"And why is that?" Bone pressed.

"You don't need to know."

"I'm Scourge's deputy," he argued. "I have a right to know."

Bone unsheathed his claws and raked them down Fireheart's shoulders. Fireheart ducked and slashed Bone's belly. Bone was pinned down when a white she-cat barreled into Fireheart, knocking the breath out of him. Her exotic pink eyes flashed. He was just about to kill the she-cat when someone intercepted the blow.

"Stop this at once!" A high-pitched ice-shattering-like voice commanded. "Sugar, that's enough. Go lick your wounds."

"Yes, Scourge." Sugar dipped her head to the small black tom.

Scourge stared after her, then turned his icy blue gaze to Fireheart. "It's been a long time, brother."

Sugar belongs to my sister, and every other charact

Graystripe's POV

[image]

'Brother?' Graystripe wondered. 'How is this miniature trash gremlin related to my best friend?' He shrugged the question away.

"Did you know?" Willowpelt whispered to him.

"Know what?" he asked his mother.

"Did you know Fireheart has a brother?"

Graystripe shook his head. A sudden jab of worry and loneliness coursed through his heart. 'Is Fireheart going to leave ThunderClan and I to live with his kin?' He shook away the horrid thought. 'No,' he told himself. 'Fireheart would never do that. He's too loyal.'

'Right . . . ?'

Graystripe realized Fireheart and Scourge had exchanged words. He opened his mouth to speak, then remembered that Fireheart had said to not say a word unless he was asked his name.

"Well, that's a shame," Scourge mewed. "I had been hoping you would come back here."

The small tom hesitated, looking thoughtful. Then added, "And I'm sure Fury would have certainly welcomed you back. BloodClan needs cats like you, Fireheart."

"Then find other cats like me," Fireheart hissed. "I don't need BloodClan."

Gasps from the BloodClan cats erupted like a wildfire. Graystripe guessed Fireheart wasn't really supposed to talk like that to Scourge. Brackenpaw leaned in closer to Graystripe. "Fireheart seems uncomfortable," his apprentice muttered.

He turned his head, noticing that Fireheart was shifting from paw to paw. "You're right," Graystripe whispered back.

If he had a choice between staying here or going back to camp, Graystripe would choose the camp any day. If he were back in camp, he'd be able to sneak out and see Silverstream. A pang of guilt struck him. 'Am I replacing Fireheart with Silverstream? Or is she just rubbing him the wrong way?'

Graystripe knew what he was thinking about wasn't relevant to the situation, but he couldn't help it. He couldn't help remembering the conversation he had with Silverstream a few days before.

[START OF FLASHBACK]

"Silverstream." Graystripe stared at the beautiful tabby she-cat. He knew he could confide in her.

"Hmm?" She looked at him with her big blue eyes. She frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"N-no," Graystripe stammered. "I mean, yes. Well . . . it's Fireheart."

"What about him?" Silverstream wondered.

Graystripe took a deep breath. "Fireheart doesn't seem to want to be around me anymore," he explained. "I don't know if he feels like I'm replacing him, or if I screwed up. I want to know what's going on with him, but . . . I'm afraid of talking to him. I'm afraid of confronting him. It doesn't seem right to feel that way, though. I mean, Fireheart's my best friend. I know I shouldn't be scared to talk to him, but I am. I don't know what to do."

Silverstream remained silent for a moment. It was almost as if Graystripe could see her mind churning as she thought about what he told her. "Well," Silverstream began, "you should push your bad thoughts about the situation away. If you screwed up, forget it. The only way you're going to find out what's going on with Fireheart is if you TALK to him. Sitting back, being afraid to confront him won't solve anything."

That's one reason why Graystripe loved Silverstream. She always

said it how it was. She never sugar-coated anything unless she believed it to be absolutely necessary. "Do you think I'm replacing Fireheart? Or that I just screwed up?"

"I don't know," Silverstream admitted. "Maybe you screwed up. But if you did, it's done now. As for replacing Fireheart, I know you're not. He might feel like you are, so just talk to him and figure it out."

"I will." Graystripe looked over his shoulder. He could scent his Clanmates coming closer. It was Tigerclaw, Darkstripe, Sandstorm, and Runningwind by the smell of it. They weren't cats who would be exactly friendly towards RiverClan warriors on ThunderClan territory.

"You'd better go," he meowed. "I scent my Clanmates coming this way."

"Goodbye, my love," mewed Silverstream.

Graystripe waved his tail. "Goodbye, Silverstream," he responded. "And thank you!"

[END OF FLASHBACK]

Graystripe realized Fireheart didn't disapprove of Silverstream because it was against the code. He disapproved of her because he felt like Graystripe was replacing him with Silverstream! Why hadn't Graystripe noticed that before?

"You may pass." Scourge's icy voice jolted him back to the present.

Fireheart replied, "Thank you, Scourge."

They passed through the rest of BloodClan's territory, coming out into the sunlight. Graystripe watched as Fireheart tore the collar off from around his neck. Then he suddenly wondered why Fireheart couldn't have done that the day he joined ThunderClan, instead of having to fight Longtail.

Looking around, Graystripe spotted Tigerclaw sitting down, licking one forepaw then drawing it over his ear. Willowpelt, Whitestorm, and Longtail seemed on high alert. Bluestar was silently observing

the area, while Cinderpaw and Brackenpaw looked like the encounter with the BloodClan cats had put them on edge. Fireheart seemed unnaturally wary and somewhat fearful of their surroundings. Even Graystripe was more collected than Fireheart appeared to be at the moment.

They were going to see a kittypet called Nutmeg. When Bluestar revealed which kittypet they were going to talk to, Graystripe had instantly scented Fireheart's fear-scent. He clearly knew who this Nutmeg is. What's so wrong with Nutmeg? Why does Fireheart seem to hate her? Is he scared of her?

'What is Fireheart hiding?'

Nutmeg's POV

"What are we doing today?" Quince asked. The beautiful gray she-cat leaped down from the fence gracefully.

Nutmeg rolled her eyes. "What we do every day," she meowed.

"Which is . . . ?" pressed Quince.

"How much fur do you have in your head, Quince?"

"Hey, that's not fair!" Quince protested. "I was only asking a question."

Nutmeg thought for a moment. "What are you doing today?" she asked. "I'm doing what I do every day - planning revenge."

"Nutmeg." Quince glanced from one side to the other anxiously. "Is this really a good idea?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," she mewed. "is it really necessary for you to plot revenge against Rusty like this? He is your son after all."

"His name isn't Rusty," hissed Nutmeg. "I've already told you he went to be part of ThunderClan. The fool's name is Fireheart now."

"Does it really matter what his name is?" Quince asked. "He's still your son. You should still love him like one, even if he isn't living the life you'd always hoped he'd live."

"I don't care what life he lives!" Nutmeg yowled. "Fireheart may as well be dead for all I care! He's no son of mine!"

That silenced Quince, leaving Nutmeg to get lost in her thoughts. *Why can't she just leave me alone about it?* she thought scornfully. A thin smile crept onto her face as an idea hit her. *If I get Quince to work with me, Fireheart will certainly fall into my mercy.*

Just as Nutmeg parted her jaws to speak, Quince spoke. "N-Nutmeg," she stammered. "Do you really mean that? Will it really not change a thing if he died?"

"No," Nutmeg stated firmly. "If Fireheart dies, it won't change a thing. It won't mean a thing."

"How can you say that?" Quince screeched. "Love all of your kits equally! Just because he's not a house cat like you, doesn't mean he can't mean anything."

"Quince . . ." Nutmeg looked down at her paws, pretending to look ashamed. "I'm so sorry."

Quince seemed to believe her, and Nutmeg felt guilty about it. "Can you . . ." she began. "Can you help me learn?"

The gray she-cat nodded, resting her fluffy tail over Nutmeg's brown tabby shoulders. "Sure," she replied.

"Nutmeg," Quince mewed gently. "All of your kits have different personalities and preferences, but that doesn't mean you should love any of them less than the other. Princess, Tommy, and Filou may live the life of a house cat, that doesn't mean all five of your kits have to. Luna and Fireheart chose separate lives for a reason. They weren't suited the life with housefolk and fences."

Quince paused, glancing at Nutmeg. "I'm following you," Nutmeg assured her friend.

"Fireheart went to live in the forest with ThunderClan, right?" Quince asked.

"Right," Nutmeg confirmed.

"And Luna went to live as a loner along on the Thunderpaths, correct?"

"Yes," she agreed. "What does that have to do with anything, though?"

"I'm just trying to tell you that you love Luna because Luna's your

daughter," Quince explained. "Why can't you love Fireheart as you do Luna? He's your youngest kit, and you were never there for him."

"I - I understand," Nutmeg lied. *Why can't she see I'm planning to kill him to end his suffering?*

Nutmeg opened her mouth to speak, but again, Quince beat her to it. "Nutmeg," her friend meowed sorrowfully. "Just think of how much you've missed. Fireheart's first steps. His first word. The day he opened his eyes. The first time he went outside. Those are all things you should never want to miss out on, but you did. It's done now. There's no going back in time to see it all."

Nutmeg noticed Quince's amber eyes glistened with sadness. "You're thinking about Tiny, aren't you?" Nutmeg guessed. Quince nodded her head.

"Will you help me, Quince?"

"With what?"

"Getting Fireheart back," Nutmeg explained. "I want to apologize to him. I want to apologize for being abusive, and not being there for all the important and little things."

Quince nodded. "I'll help you," she promised. "I'll do anything I can to help you, Nutmeg."

Nutmeg turned around, a chilling smile spread across her face. *Little does she know, I'm going to apologize the way I did Jake.*

I'll kill him.

Longtail's POV

[image]

"We're almost there." Longtail looked up to hear Fireheart's voice quiver.

What are you scared of little warrior? he thought. He shook his head to clear it. *No. This isn't me. This is Tigerclaw and Darkstripe.*

Longtail didn't know why he ever chose to side with Darkstripe and Tigerclaw. He knew for a fact that Fireheart was a good warrior, having proved his loyalty to ThunderClan a thousand times over. Why couldn't he have just kept his mouth shut that day? Honestly, if he had to chose between Tigerclaw and Fireheart to be ThunderClan's next leader, he would choose Fireheart any day.

Sure, Tigerclaw as a strong and experienced warrior, but his solution to every problem was to fight. Even when Tigerclaw was right, he was wrong. Fireheart was a young and inexperienced warrior, yes, but he tried to seek out a compromise. He only ever fought a battle if either Bluestar ordered him to, or if he knew there was no other way. Tigerclaw always saw compromises and peace-making as weaknesses.

"Longtail," Willowpelt meowed. "You okay?"

Longtail nodded his head silently. He glanced anxiously at Tigerclaw, who was eyeing him suspiciously. *Does he still think I was working with Ravenpaw?*

Tigerclaw beckoned him over with his dark thick-furred tail. "What are you thinking about?" he mewed coolly once Longtail approached him.

"M-my thoughts are not yours," Longtail stammered. "They're mine, and mine a-alone."

"Is that so?" Tigerclaw's eyes flashed coldly.

"I was just thinking about the different outcomes of meeting this kittypet," he lied.

Tigerclaw don't look convinced. He leaned in closer and hissed in his ear, "Tell me the truth, Longtail. Before you end up like Ravenpaw."

Longtail's heart raced and his belly fluttered. "I-I am tell-telling the truth, T-Tigerclaw."

The dark tabby's breath ruffled Longtail's ear fur, the look in his eyes was murderous. "You aren't telling the truth. I know you aren't," the ThunderClan deputy hissed threateningly. "And unless you really want to join StarClan now, you will tell me."

He snapped. He had enough of this. Enough of Tigerclaw's threatening into loyalty. "No!" Longtail snarled. "I will not tell you!"

Every cat turned to stare at him in shock. They didn't even know why he was so angry, but they still seem surprised.

"I've had enough of you threatening me into being loyal to you. I've had enough of following you blindly," he growled. "You see compromise and peace-seeking as weaknesses. That's why you hate specific cats so much. But really, those aren't weaknesses, they're strengths. If you don't realize that, then you are as weak as you think peace-makers are. You don't care about peace or mercy! You only think fighting is the answer to every problem. That's why you desire blind loyalty - why you want to know what each of your *followers* think."

Longtail paused, panting. His fur was fluffed up in anger now. He wasn't finished yet. He still had some more things he wanted to say to Tigerclaw. He was going to admit what he was thinking now. It was time Tigerclaw knew he couldn't control every cat's thoughts, and manipulate them to what he wanted cats to think.

"And you know what?" Longtail meowed. "I'm done! I'm done hiding what I really think about. If it came down to it, Fireheart would make a better leader than you. You're only scared you'll be outshined and forgotten because you were replaced by a kittypet.

I'm done being one of your followers. You can't control my actions or manipulate my thoughts. They are mine and mine alone. I'm responsible for what I say and do, and nothing *you* do can change that."

"Longtail . . ." Bluestar's voice trailed off into a whisper. "You should have been more honest before now. I am proud of you, though, for standing up for yourself."

The majestic blue-gray she-cat glared coldly at Tigerclaw. "Longtail is right, Tigerclaw," she mewed. "You can't control every cat. You are not leader, and a leader doesn't even control their cats by force or blind loyalty. If I had a choice, I would replace you as deputy. But unfortunately," she sighed. "I cannot. It would defy the will of StarClan's approval."

"Let's go." Bluestar flicked her tail to follow, nodding her head to Fireheart. "I can take it from here," she told him.

Fireheart dipped his head to the leader of the ThunderClan. He fell into step beside Longtail. "Do you really mean what you said?" he asked, somewhat awkwardly.

"I really do," Longtail replied.

Longtail's heart had sped up and he felt a little nervous. His head was screaming at him to follow logic, but his heart was yowling at him to follow his feelings.

The orange warrior walked forward to pad beside Graystripe. They both seemed to be listening to their apprentices - Brackenpaw and Cinderpaw - describing what they saw and scented to their mentors.

Oh no, Longtail thought. *I only feel that way around Fireheart.*

Longing and dread creeped over his pelt. *Am I in love with Fireheart?*

Snowkit's POV

[image]

Snowkit emerged from the nursery and gazed around the clearing of ThunderClan's camp. He could see cat's lips moving, but he couldn't hear them. He shook his head, flattening his ears then raising them again. Almost as if he thought that's all it would take to gain his hearing.

A cat patted her paw on the ground, sending vibrations through it that Snowkit could detect. He turned around, his small white fluffy tail held up high in the air. He spotted his mother, who was waving at him with her tail. She gestured with her paw for him to go to her.

"Mama?" Snowkit knew what he wanted to say, so he said it. Though he didn't how loud he was or what his voice sounded like.

At that moment, he realized that he didn't even know his mother's name. His heart sank. *If I don't even know my mother's name, will I ever be a warrior?*

A she-cat with matted gray fur sat hunched in front of a stone den. Snowkit recognized the sweet scent of herbs, noticing the she-cat's fur had herb leaves sticking to it. He ran up to mother, then looked around the clearing again, taking in the beauty of the camp.

A pale-golden tabby she-cat waddled out of the nursery and sat beside Snowkit's mother. The beautiful she-cat said something to the speckle-furred queen. The she-cat looked at Snowkit with a thoughtful look in her amber eyes. He guessed she would have her kits soon based off how swollen her belly was.

Then she gestured to his mother's tail, also at the clusters of speckles on her fur.

"Speckle?" Snowkit asked.

The pale queen nodded her head, motioning with her paw for him to go on.

"Speckle . . . tail? Speckletail?"

Snowkit understood what the golden queen was trying to do. She was trying to teach him each of his Clanmate's names just by motioning to something that indicated their name. And she had started with his mother - Speckletail.

She gestured to her own pale-golden fur. Then at the sun, ending with a flower. "Sunflower?"

She shook her head. Snowkit thought for a moment. *Well . . . the sun is yellow, but it can be golden at times. Golden . . . Golden-what? Goldenflower . . .?"*

"Goldenflower?" he guessed.

She nodded her head, joy filling Goldenflower and Speckletail's eyes.

I did it! Snowkit thought happily. *I learned my mama and Goldenflower's names!*

Snowkit finally realized that he might never become a warrior because he couldn't hear anything. But now that he could learn each of his Clanmate's names? Maybe. Just maybe. He could become a warrior like he'd always wanted.

Bluestar's POV

[image]

Is this the best idea? Bluestar thought doubtfully. *Maybe I should have left Tigerclaw back at camp, or I stay behind.*

She shook her doubt away, which had started building up in her mind like a squirrel building up a stash of acorns. Bluestar suddenly wondered if Fireheart knew Nutmeg on a personal level. *I'll have to ask him when I get the chance.*

"How much farther?" Cinderpaw asked.

"Cinderpaw," snapped Fireheart. "Hush."

"It's alright," Bluestar meowed, taking note of Fireheart's change in attitude. "Not too much farther, though. About half a day of traveling left and then we'll be there."

Cinderpaw groaned. "My paws are about to fall off!" she complained.

"Cinderpaw!" Fireheart snapped again. "Stop complaining."

Bluestar glanced over her shoulder to see Graystripe butt Fireheart with his flank. The gray tom gave his friend a concerned look through amber eyes. She fell back to walk beside the two toms.

"Bluestar," Graystripe meowed quietly enough for only her to hear. "I want to talk to you."

She nodded her head, falling back with Graystripe at her side. "Tigerclaw," she called up. "Keep going forward."

Making sure Tigerclaw had heard her, Bluestar turned her icy blue gaze to Graystripe. "Well?" she prompted.

Graystripe drew in a deep breath before speaking. "It's Fireheart," he mewed.

"What about him?" Her voice softened as she understood what was coming.

"I'm worried he's hiding something he shouldn't be," he told her. "The past moon or so he's been acting like this, and I don't know why. I've told him to see if Yellowfang can help him or if he can tell me what's bothering him, but . . . . . he says he's fine when he clearly isn't."

"I have noticed a change in . . ." Bluestar's voice trailed off as she searched for the right word. "Temper," she finished.

Graystripe's voice grew suddenly very quiet, so Bluestar had to lean in closer to him to hear what he was saying. "I - I know I probably won't be able to stay in ThunderClan, but . . . . ."

"What do you mean?" Bluestar asked, cocking her head in confusion. "Why would you not be able to stay in ThunderClan?"

"Do you know Silverstream of RiverClan?" he asked her.

She nodded her head, wondering what Crookedstar's daughter had to do with anything.

"Well, I think she's why Fireheart's acting like he is," the gray warrior meowed. "I - I fell in love with her and I think my distraction is irritating him."

Bluestar thought for a moment. "You could be right," she agreed. "But I'm not going to send you away from the Clan for falling in love. You're a strong and loyal warrior. It would be unwise to exile you for something as simple-seeming as love."

Graystripe dipped his head to Bluestar gratefully. "Go on," she urged. "Brackenpaw's looking at you like he has something to tell you about."

The fluffy gray warrior dipped his head again, then padded up to walk beside Fireheart with Brackenpaw telling him something very enthusiastically.

Graystripe fell in love with Crookedstar's daughter, Silverstream of

RiverClan, Bluestar recalled. *I wonder if Graystripe is 100% right about that being the reason Fireheart is acting the way he is.*

Bluestar hesitated for a split second as a thought struck her.

Wait -

Fireheart's POV

[image]

Fireheart felt Graystripe's fur brush against his side. It was comforting in a way. He suddenly felt like he was being watched. He looked around to see who was watching him, but there was no cat.

"Alright," Bluestar meowed. "We'll stop here for the night."

Fireheart sat down, his belly churning with apprehension. Willowpelt approached and dropped a mouse at his paws. He looked up at her from licking his chest fur.

"Here," Willowpelt meowed. "Eat."

Fireheart dipped his head to the older warrior gratefully. "Thank you."

"No problem." Willowpelt turned and walked away, sitting down and sharing tongues with Whitestorm.

Fireheart slumped down onto his belly, laying his head on his paws. Graystripe - who had laid next to him after Willowpelt left - nudged him. "Are you okay?" he asked. Fireheart nodded his head, his mind flooding with unbearable thoughts as he wondered what Nutmeg would do to him when she saw him. Would she kill him like she had threatened?

He pushed the mouse toward Graystripe. "You can have it."

He didn't see Graystripe's reaction because he had already close his eyes and slipped into a trouble sleep. He relived the exact same moment in time he used to when he was a kit.

dream sequence

Rusty blinked open his eyes, feeling cold. He looked around only to notice that his parents weren't there. Standing up, he quietly padded

across the hard floor of the house that belonged to his mother's housefolk. He followed the familiar scents of his mother and father - Nutmeg and Jake.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" Rusty heard his father's voice.

Then his mother responded. "I wanted to talk about . . . . . fate, shall we?"

"Fate?" Jake sounded confused.

Rusty peered around the corner of the wall to see his mother cornering his father. "Yes," Nutmeg crooned. "Fate."

"Nutmeg, what is this?" Jake stared at his mate. Rusty could see the suspicion in his father's forest-green eyes.

Nutmeg's claws slid out and Jake's eyes widened. "Nutmeg . . . . ."

She pounced on Jake and sunk her teeth into his throat. "No!" Rusty wailed, coming out of hiding.

"Why did you do that?" he demanded.

Nutmeg whirled around to see her youngest kit standing there defiantly. Rusty felt nothing but anger and hatred bubbling up inside him as he looked at his mother. She pinned him down faster than he could get away. One of her paws was slammed down on his neck so he couldn't get up. She leaned in closer to him.

"If you tell anyone about this, I will do everything *in my power to silence both of you," she hissed threateningly. Rusty could feel her breath, warm on his ear fur. "Got it?"*

Rusty nodded his head. Nutmeg grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and flung him up to his paws. While doing that, she sliced down his belly and searing pain pulsed through him. He let out a strangled cry, barely managing to stay on his paws, and ran back to his littermates.

****end dream sequence****

Fireheart felt someone shaking him. "Fireheart, wake up!"

He rolled over to see Longtail standing over him. Wondering why Longtail cared, he remembered that the pale tabby warrior was on first watch for the night. Fireheart sat up, licking his paw then drawing it over his ear in an attempt of hiding his fear. He hadn't had a dream about that in a long time. So why did he have it just now?

Maybe because we're so close to reaching Nutmeg? he guessed. *No. It has to be something else.*

He stood up and started walking away when Longtail spoke to him.

"Are you okay?" asked Longtail. "You were muttering and twitching in your sleep."

"I'm fine," Fireheart responded.

Then - eager to change the subject - he meowed, "I'll be back. I'm just going hunting before everyone wakes up."

Longtail nodded his head to let Fireheart know that he heard him. Then he turned and bounded away.

Approaching a small oak tree, Fireheart stopped and parted his jaws to taste the air. *Mouse.* He saw a scrawny little mouse scurrying around the oak tree, gathering small nuts and other food for it to eat later. Dropping into a hunter's crouch, he spread his weight evenly among all four paws. He stalked forward, carefully placing his paws on the ground so the mouse wouldn't detect him.

Before he caught the small brown rodent, growling erupted from the bushes beside him. He remained crouching, but unsheathed his claws and turned toward the growling. A brown tabby she-cat hurled herself out of the bushes and slammed into his side, knocking him to the ground and driving the breath out of his lungs. Fireheart tried to yowl to alert someone, but the she-cat cut him off by thrusting her paw onto his neck, blocking off his ability to breathe. He thrashed and struggled under her grip, landing blows on her shoulders, belly, and head. Realizing who the she-cat was, he managed to choke out her name.

"Nutmeg!" he gasped.

A thin, cruel smile spread across Nutmeg's face. Blood foam and saliva flowing in steady puffs from her mouth, and her amber eyes held a wild look. "Yes, my dear son," she snarled in such a calm way that is was creepy. "Come to mama."

She lifted Fireheart's head so he was closer to her. He could smell her sour breath, which was hot on his muzzle. He fought back the bile that rose in his throat. Everything started spinning as he continued to have to room to breathe - Nutmeg's paw was still fastened on his neck. Without warning, Nutmeg slammed Fireheart back against the ground, hitting his head on the hard, compact earth.

Fireheart's vision started fading and Nutmeg's manipulatively threatening voice grew distant. Then - as Fireheart felt Nutmeg grip his scruff in her jaws and begin to drag him away - he was engulfed in an uneasily dark unconsciousness.

Longtail's POV

[image]

Longtail sat on guard, waiting patiently for Fireheart to return. As the sun began to rise, the orange warrior still hadn't made an appearance. So Longtail decided to go and find him. The others would wake soon and Bluestar would want to leave as soon as possible.

As he padded through the short patch of forest, he caught Fireheart's scent mixed with blood scent. Longtail broke into a run. He came up on the scene where Fireheart's scent was strongest. There was another cat's scent, too. It smelled like a she-cat's scent. Blood was spattered everything, making puddles on the green grass. He bent down at one of the small puddles of blood, scenting it for any sign of the missing tom. A familiar scent hit his nose.

Fireheart.

Longtail shot straight up to his paws. He turned and sprinted back to the others. They were already starting to wake up. Whitestorm and Bluestar were talking quietly, Cinderpaw and Brackenpaw were grooming each other, Graystripe was licking his paw and drawing it over his ear, and Tigerclaw and Willowpelt were just sitting up.

"Bluestar!" Longtail gasped.

The ThunderClan leader turned her head to look at Longtail with her icy blue eyes. She leaped to her paws, just as every other cat there did when they saw him.

"Longtail, what's happened?" Bluestar demanded.

Longtail's lungs burned from running so fast, but he fought through it to answer her. "Something happened to Fireheart."

Bluestar's eyes widened. "Let's go."

She signaled with her tail for every cat to follow. "Longtail," she ordered. "Lead us to the last place you remember scenting him."

Longtail nodded, taking them to the crime scene. "Fireheart," he heard Graystripe whisper, voice quivering.

The blood spatters and puddles seemed to have a stronger scent, despite the scents being stale. The she-cat's scent was stronger than usual. Then Longtail realized it was a different she-cat's scent. He looked around to see a pretty long-furred she-cat pad out into the crime scene. Her amber eyes showed distress.

"D-do you happen to have a lost friend?" the she-cat asked, approaching the group of ThunderClan cats. "Going by the na-name o-of Fireheart?"

"Yes," Willowpelt meowed. "Do you know where he is?"

The she-cat nodded her head. "My name is Quince," she meowed. "I can take you to your friend, but I'm going to warn you that his situation is something that he needs to fight alone."

"What do you mean?" Whitestorm asked. "Fight alone?"

"Nutmeg is taking her revenge," Quince explained quickly. "She's trying to kill Fireheart, but he's stalling her for now."

Her eyes suddenly filled with guilt. "I'm so sorry!" she wailed. "It's my fault! Nutmeg tricked me into helping her!"

Bluestar stepped forward, touching her tail tip to Quince's shoulder. "I'm sure you didn't mean it, Quince," Bluestar assured her. "But can you take us to Fireheart now?"

Quince nodded, leading them to their flame-pelted friend. She took them around the corner of a large Twoleg den, and under a small hole in a fence. She stopped in front of a Twoleg fence, a larger hole in the center. Leading them through it, Longtail could feel the thin branches of the bush brushing against his back and sides as he squeezed through.

"here we are." Quince finally came to a halt in the garden enclosure.

They saw a limp orange body in the corner of the garden. A brown tabby she-cat slipped out of the Twoleg den, bounding across the grassy garden and over to the limp body. She kicked it, yowling, "Get up!"

The orange cat struggled to its paws, bleeding from several different wounds. Longtail noticed the tom's forest-green eyes shimmering with pain.

"Fireheart." Longtail turned his head to see Cinderpaw quivering, muttering her mentor's name. Her voice was quivering as she continued whispering.

Fireheart's fur was ruffled and matted with dry, sticky blood, fresh blood still streaming out of a few of his wounds. He looked like he felt dizzy, swaying slightly, almost as if he wished he were dead.

Longtail had already confirmed to himself that he had a crush on Fireheart, and it pained him to see the orange warrior in that state. He had come to respect the young former kittypet and his decisions. But . . . . . if Fireheart died, then Longtail would never be able to confess to him. And if Longtail confessed to him, Fireheart living . . . . . .

Would Fireheart accept his confession?

Cinderpaw's POV

[image]

Oh, no, Cinderpaw thought despairingly. *No, no, no, no, no!*

She stared at her mentor in horror. Fireheart seemed to be struggling to stay standing. Blood was streaming and dripping from several different wounds, each at a different stage of infection and severity. Cinderpaw wished she could just run up to Fireheart and tell her mentor that it would be okay. They would get him to Yellowfang. But they were in Twolegplace, not very close to the medicine cat den back at ThunderClan's camp.

Her brother, Brackenpaw, pressed his golden-brown tabby pelt against her smoky-gray pelt. As their fur brushed, Cinderpaw wished she wasn't so worried about every cat - that she wasn't so caring. Then she felt guilty for wishing that. She remembered her mother, Frostfur telling her that there was nothing wrong with being empathetic. She had said it was more of a strength instead of a weakness.

But now . . . . . Now she stood there, staring her battered and bloodied mentor, and she couldn't help but wish that. The pain of being so empathetic coursed through her veins as she involuntarily put herself in Fireheart's paws. She imagined what it would be like in his situation - pain searing through her entire body, rattling her brain as she tried to stop it.

Brackenpaw glanced at his sister. Cinderpaw saw his amber eyes flicker with sympathy. "It's okay," he whispered to her. "Fireheart will make it through this. I know he will."

"I know," she told her brother. "I just wish I weren't so empathetic at times."

"Cinderpaw," Brackenpaw mewed, his voice barely audible to she had to lean in closer to hear him. "Remember what Frostfur said: 'being empathetic isn't a weakness. It isn't a curse. It's a strength, an

advantage.'"

Cinderpaw remained silent, wishing her brother wouldn't remind her of that conversation. But then he went on, "Cinderpaw, think of being empathetic as an advantage in battle. Size and speed are advantages, just as strength and wits are. Your empathy is just like an advantage in battle because you can tell when something is bothering another cat, so you can help them through whatever they're struggling with."

Her blue eyes lit up with hope. Brackenpaw always knew how to make her feel better. She turned her gaze to look at Fireheart again. Cinderpaw felt Longtail stiffen beside her. *Wait - Longtail? Why is Longtail so concerned about Fireheart? I thought he hates him.*

She noticed a little bit of a moony look in Longtail's pale green-blue eyes. *Oh, great StarClan. Longtail has a crush on my mentor. My mentor is a tom. Longtail is a tom. I don't think that will go over well with the rest of the Clan.*

"Fireheart," the brown tabby she-cat hissed.

Fireheart turned to face her. She was standing profile to the group of Clan cats. "Nutmeg," Fireheart meowed, his voice flooded with pain.

Nutmeg raised her paw, claws unsheathed. Cinderpaw realized Nutmeg was getting ready for a killing blow. Fireheart didn't move. She struck his shoulders and he staggered, shaking his head. He stared up at the she-cat with a look of sadness in his forest-green. Why Fireheart looked like that, Cinderpaw didn't know.

"I'm not going to hurt you!" he meowed.

"Coward!" Nutmeg yowled, striking him again.

Out of the corner of her eye, Cinderpaw spotted Graystripe try to get to Fireheart to help him, but Bluestar barred his way with her tail. "This is Fireheart's fight," Bluestar meowed. "Not ours."

"No son of mine would deny a fight," hissed Nutmeg, taking a threatening step forward.

Wait - this evil cat is my mentor's mother?

"Well," Fireheart retorted. *"I* will."

Fireheart's POV

[image]

Nutmeg lifted her paw, her claws remaining unsheathed. Blood and saliva foamed at the corners of the kittypet she-cat's mouth. She slammed her paw down, but before it came into contact with Fireheart's neck, Quince darted in front of him. The blow was made to the she-cat's shoulders, causing her to stagger.

"Quince!" Fireheart meowed. "This is my fight. You can't get hurt because of this."

Quince gave him a long look through her gentle amber eyes, which revealed her sadness. "I'm sorry, Fireheart," she mewed. "But I can't let you die."

Quince spun around to face Nutmeg. The insane brown she-cat clawed at Quince's neck before she could do anything, tearing a hole in her airway. The soft-furred gray she-cat gasped in pain.

"No!" yowled Fireheart. "Quince . . . . . ?"

He nudged the she-cat with his forepaw, trying to convince himself that she was just hurt. That she was just asleep. This was all a dream. Nothing here had actually happened. Quince was still alive. But she wasn't. Fireheart still could not bring himself to face the fact that Quince was dead because she had tried to save him.

Fireheart lifted his head to stare at his mother. She hurled herself at him, shoving him to the ground. He pummeled her soft belly with his back paws, claws unsheathed. He wasn't willing to hurt Nutmeg, no matter how evil or insane she was.

"Fight me!" NUtmeg yowled. "Unsheathe your claws and fight me!"

"No," he told her. "I won't."

Nutmeg planted her paw on his neck, pressing down slowly. He

could feel the air drawing itself away from his lungs. He gasped for breath.

"I won't hurt you," Fireheart gasped. "I - don't care what you've done. I - won't - ever - hurt - you."

"Fool!" She slashed at her youngest kit again, her claws connecting with his cheek.

When Fireheart leaped to his paws, he looked his mother in the eye. Her amber eyes revealed her distress; her unhappiness. Nutmeg was suffering, and Fireheart couldn't bear to see her like that. He ran at her, holding her down against the grass.

"I can't watch you suffer." Grief edged Fireheart's mew. "I *won't* let you suffer anymore."

He raised his paw, his claws unsheathed now. As much as he didn't want to do this, he knew his mother would continue to suffer until her death. It would be more merciful to end her suffering now, instead of letting her to endure it. Refusing to hesitate any longer, he looked away as he swiped his claws across Nutmeg's neck, making a clean cut across it. Fireheart backed away from Nutmeg, feeling Graystripe come to stand beside him.

"I'm sorry. . . . ." Fireheart whispered.

He turned and walked away, Graystripe walked alongside him. Bluestar took the lead again. Fireheart suddenly stopped. He turned back around to face the dead bodies of two of the cats he cared most about. Running up to both dead bodies, he dug two holes. He dragged Quince's body into one, burying her with final words of farewell. Then, he carried Nutmeg's body into the other. He laid his mother's body in the hole, taking longer to bury her.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled again. "I've already forgiven you, mother."

Fireheart wanted to study every last feature of her face before he buried her. Never seeing her again. When he finished burying his mother, he turned and bounded up to Graystripe again. His apprentice - Cinderpaw - let her fur brush against his. He

completely forgot about his wounds until he felt searing pain course through his body. He stumbled, losing his balance, and collapsed.

"Fireheart!" Cinderpaw gasped.

Fireheart heard distant voices and smelled a variety of different scents. Then he was swallowed up by the depths of the greater force - unconsciousness.

Graystripe's POV

"How fast can we get back to camp?" Whitestorm asked.

Whitestorm and Tigerclaw lifted Fireheart onto Graystripe's back. The orange warrior was like a dead weight. Bluestar looked indecisive; probably having a hard time figuring out the answer to Whitestorm's question.

"If we don't stop at all, and maintain a fast pace," Bluestar finally responded. "We should be able to make it back to camp by sunset."

Graystripe could feel Fireheart breathing faintly against his side. He was worried out of his mind, but also confused about what had happened. He could feel his friend's fur, a lot hotter than it originally was. He could tell that wasn't a good sign. It meant Fireheart's wounds were getting badly infected.

Bluestar had set a swift pace, making sure they could make it back to camp by sunset. Graystripe noticed that Cinderpaw looked distraught, while Brackenpaw was seemingly trying to make her feel better. Willowpelt and Longtail were on either side of Graystripe, steadying Fireheart's unconscious form.

"Bluestar," Willowpelt called, her voice sounding anxious. "Fireheart is still losing blood and his breathing doesn't sound good. Any cat can tell that."

Graystrip listened closer to Fireheart's breathing. It sounded like harsh, raspy gasping. He felt something wet and sticky against his back and sides. Then he realized it was Fireheart's blood he was feeling. He picked up the pace just as Bluestar did.

The sun seemed to be setting faster than it normally did. Time was clearly not on their side at the moment. Graystripe's hear was pounding as Willowpelt nudged Fireheart into a steadier position, while Longtail helped keep him on the gray warrior's back since they were on the move.

In the distance, they could see the trees of ThunderClan territory rising up to block the blazing sun. Graystripe's heart lifted with hope. Naturally, that was when he felt Fireheart slipping away from the living.

"Hang in there," Graystripe whispered. "Just a little longer, Fireheart. We're almost there."

They raced into camp as soon as they made it to the entrance. Graystripe broke off from the group and ran into Yellowfang's den. The old medicine cat was sorting herbs, but when she heard him enter, she spun around. Upon seeing Fireheart, Yellowfang dragged him off the gray tom's back and into a nest close to her herb store.

When Yellowfang returned a few seconds later, she crouched over Fireheart, shooing Graystripe out of her den with her thick, matted tail. Graystripe back out of her den, his heart racing.

Please be okay. Please, StarClan, if you have anything against me, don't take it out on Fireheart. Graystripe prayed to his warrior ancestors. *Or if you have anything against Fireheart. . . . . Please just let him live. Let him be okay. I will do* anything. *Kill me instead if you have to, but spare my best friend.*

Graystripe caught a whiff of Sandstorm's scent. He turned to see her running up to him, her pale green eyes were clear with her distress. "What happened?" she demanded. "What's all this I hear about Fireheart being injured?"

Graystripe sighed, but he explained what had happened. From when they met Scourge and some other BloodClan cats, to when they got back to camp. Sandstorm remained silent, only letting out small gasps of horror. By the end, he looked back at her to see her expression - a look of sheer horror. He understood why she was horrified. Clanborn cats weren't treated like that by their mothers.

"Will Fireheart be alright?" Sandstorm asked, casting a glance at the medicine cat den.

"I don't know," admitted Graystripe, shaking his head. "I really don't know."

StarClan, I will plead with you for as long as it takes. . . . . Please let my best friend survive.

Hey! Finally! I finished another chapter. What do you think will happen to Fireheart? What do you think SHOULD happen to him?

StarClan's POV (Mosskit)

I had no idea what to write, so I decided to see what's going on in StarClan. (I'm speeding up the hawk scene. Sorry to the Snowkit fans.)

Mosskit approached her father, who was sitting beside a small pool and looking into it. She sat beside the russet-furred tom and stared into the beautiful, starlit water. She saw what was going on in ThunderClan. She heard Graystripe's pleas. *StarClan, I will plead for you for as long as it takes. . . . . Please let my best friend survive.*

Mosskit twitched her ears, her gray-and-white fur glowing with stars. Her heart cried out for the young warrior, and she wished there was something she could do to help him. But . . . . . StarClan isn't as powerful as the Clans think they are. There's only so much they can do. She looked back into the pool.

A small white kit, no older than she was, pounced on a butterfly but missed. Mosskit let out a purr of amusement. Her father - Oakheart - stiffened beside her. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Look," Oakheart instructed, pointing with his tail at a flying object.

Mosskit peered closer, realizing a hawk was swooping down to snatch up the deaf tom-kit. "No!" Mosskit heard an older queen screech.

The small, white kit looked up and his blue eyes stretch wide with horror and fear. He cried out for his mother, but as the queen jumped up to grab him she was thrown off by the hawk. "Snowkit!" the queen wailed.

"Mama!" Mosskit could see tears streaking down the white tom-kit's face, dampening his cheek fur.

Soon enough, she felt a strong pulse go through her. That pulse signified the death of another cat who is joining StarClan. The gray-and-white she-kit looked up at her father, whose mischievous amber eyes stared down at her.

"Go on," he meowed. "Go ahead an greet him."

Mosskit bounded away to find the tom-kit. He was standing my himself, calling out for his mother.

"You won't find your mother here, silly," Mosskit mewed.

The white tom-kit - Snowkit - turned his sky blue gaze to face her. "I just heard you," he meowed, astonished.

"Yes, you did," Mosskit told him. "You're no longer deaf in StarClan."

"I can hear?" he wondered. "In StarClan?"

"Of course," she meowed. "You're a part of StarClan now."

"I can hear!" Snowkit squealed, bouncing around with his thin tail sticking straight up in the air. He had a big smile spread across his face, too. "I can hear! I can hear!"

Mosskit flicked her tail, twitching her ears happily and her whiskers quivering in amusement. She was glad he was happy and excited to hear everything for the first time.

"My name is Mosskit," she meowed, once he had stopped jumping around and squealing with delight. "I'm here to welcome you to StarClan, Snowkit."

"Mosskit?" Snowkit meowed, cocking his head to the side. "Who are your parents? Who are your siblings?"

Mosskit curled her tail up in amusement, but also delight. No one had ever talked to her this enthusiastically before. "My parents are Bluestar and Oakheart, while my siblings are Mistyfoot and Stonefur."

"Bluestar.....?" Snowkit looked confused. "But she's a ThunderClan

cat. Oakheart's a RiverClan cat. They can't both be your parents unless....."

"Unless they were in a half-Clan relationship?" Mosskit guessed. "Yeah..... they were."

"Oh," Snowkit meowed. "I don't care, though. You still seem like a good cat."

"Thanks," Mosskit meowed, sweeping her tail around Snowkit's shoulders. "Come on!"

She raced down the slope with Snowkit chasing her, hard on her paws. "You're it!" she called over her shoulder.

"I'm gonna catch you!" Snowkit challenged.

"No, you won't!"

Very faintly, Mosskit heard Goosefeather - a former ThunderClan medicine cat - say, "Kits will be kits."

Mosskit ignored that and refused to let herself feel offended. She just enjoyed this joyous moment with Snowkit. Finally, a cat she could call her friend.

Um..... I'm not the greatest at writing cute moments between kits. So, there's this! I did speed up Snowkit's death drastically. No hate???? Please???

Bluestar's POV

Bluestar paced anxiously in her den, waiting for news of Fireheart. Yellowfang had forbidden anyone else from entering her en while she was treating the young tom. Cinderpaw had been distraught of her mentor's physical state. The poor apprentice was so worried about her mentor that she refused to eat anything. She just wasn't the same Cinderpaw every cat knew. Brackenpaw and Frostfur had tried to get her to eat, but she kept on refusing.

However, Fireheart would probably never be the same cat if he survived this. He had known all about Nutmeg from before he had even joined ThunderClan. He had agreed to go with Bluestar and the rest of her traveling companions despite the dangers that laid in their wake. He had been taken hostage by his own mother, who had gone insane, and had been forced to kill her to put her out of her misery. Bluestar could never ask any more from any of her warriors. Fireheart had suffered so much in the past few days - these injuries would be lasting, according to Yellowfang.

Graystripe and Sandstorm were worried sick about their friend. Brackenpaw was concerned, and Longtail looked scared out of his mind, even though he had tried not to. Why Longtail behaved like that was a complete and utter mystery to Bluestar. He had challenged, fought, and lost a battle against Fireheart. The pale tabby tom had despised the orange warrior ever since day one. So why suddenly start caring? He seemed to care about Fireheart as more than a Clanmate, than a friend....but why?

I knew I recognized that look in Longtail's eyes, Bluestar thought. *He looked moony. I guess he's in love.*

Bluestar pushed that thought away as she drew herself out of her den. Squeezing through the lichen curtain that shielded her den from public vision and blaring sunlight, she noticed the Clan looked more subdued and quiet than the usual, bustling, chatty Clan that she knew. She looked toward Yellowfang's den, and a burst of anxiety pulsed through her as the old medicine cat raced out of her

den.

"Bluestar!" Yellowfang called over her shoulder, not even seeming to care about privacy or quiet manners. "Sit with Fireheart until I get back!"

Without another word, or allowing Bluestar the time to respond, the former ShadowClan medicine cat darted out of the camp. She was running faster than Bluestar had ever seen a cat run before. Although, the ThunderClan leader *did* make her way across the clearing and into the medicine cat den. She came to the section of the medicine den where Fireheart was laying unconscious and wounded.

Bluestar's heart cracked into pieces at the sight of her former apprentice. He was laying on his side, cobwebs and herbal poultices plastered to his wounds. His eyes were closed and his flame-colored fur was dull. His flanks were rising and falling shakily and faintly as each breath he took rasped in his throat. He looked skinnier and weaker than he had the day before. Fireheart was almost like a son to her. She felt like a mother figure to him rather than Nutmeg being a mother figure.

Fireheart suddenly muttered something in his sleep. She crept closer to him, drawing her hindquarters beneath her as she sat down next to the young tom. He twitched in his sleep and his breathing grew faster in no time at all.

"Uh...." Bluestar wasn't sure what to do. She had a feeling something was wrong, but she wasn't a medicine cat. The blue-gray leader could only wait anxiously for Yellowfang to return. And as if StarClan had read her mind, Yellowfang burst through the entrance of her den with cobwebs in her jaws.

She dropped the cobwebs and crouched next to Fireheart. She placed her steady paws against his chest as if she were feeling for something. "Get out," ordered Yellowfang.

"What?"

"Get out."

"Alright," Bluestar agreed reluctantly.

Bluestar padded out of the medicine cat den. She started pacing the clearing, waiting for Yellowfang to appear at the entrance of her den and say Fireheart was okay. But that's not what happened.

Sandstorm and Graystripe sat huddled with Longtail just outside the warriors' den, while Brackenpaw licked Cinderpaw's ears comfortingly as they waited impatiently for Yellowfang's hopefully-soon-announcement. However, that's not what happened. They were waiting ever since sunhigh. When Yellowfang finally walked out of her den at dusk. Her broad, gray head was hung low as a sort of grief-like gesture. Then the old medicine cat raised her head and spoke up to the hushed Clan.

"Fireheart is dead."

Nutmeg's POV

"Stand forward."

Nutmeg took a step forward, looking at her surroundings. There were plains as far as she could see, hills rolling with tall grass and flowers. In the area she was in, the grass was shorter and flowers danced in the wind at her paws. She refocused herself on the cat who had spoken to her. She hadn't seen the cat, but she heard it coming from where the sun rose every morning.

Without warning, three cats were sitting in front of her. One was in the center, while the two on the sides sat a short length away from the centered cat. The two on the outside of the centered figure from the centered cat. The two on the outside of the centered figure were sitting slightly forward like a pyramid. Each cat had stars in their fur, which was wispy and flowing as river would.

"Nutmeg," the cat in the middle meowed, "you are here upon the request of a trial for your fate."

"Alright," meowed Nutmeg, "but who are you?"

The right-side spirit cat rolled its eyes. "While that question is appropriate, the question that you should be asking is who are *we*?"

"We?" she echoed.

"We," it confirmed. "We are the spirits of fate. We will choose how you live out the rest of your existence."

The left spirit cat chimed it. "You may call me Past."

"You may call me Future," the right spirit cat added.

"And, as you may have guess," the centered cat finished, "I am Present."

"You are here to be judged," meowed Future.

Nutmeg felt a tingling sensation creeping through her body. She wished this was done and over with already.

"You are aware of how severe your actions are," Present told her, "correct?"

"Yes," Nutmeg mewed. "I am aware of them."

"Good," meowed Past. "You are taking responsibility for your past actions. You killed your mate and threatened to kill your own son. In the end, you murdered your best friend and the same son you threatened many moons prior."

"I believe your fate should not be in the Kinship of the Rising Sun," Future suggested. "It should lie with the Kinship of the Rising Moon instead."

"Kinship of the Rising Moon?" Nutmeg didn't understand what that meant, nor what Kinship of the Sun was.

"Yes," Present meowed, "Kinship of the Rising Moon."

"I don't understand."

"Kinship of the Rising Moon is the place where cats go if they have done evil things in their lives and have done rare good." Future was flicking their tail against the grassy earth. "Kinship of the Rising Sun is where we send cats who have done rare evil in their lives. The other two Kinships - Kinship of the Setting Sun and Kinship of the Setting Moon - are somewhat in between the previous two Kinships. Kinship of the Setting Sun is where we send cats who have done an amount of good, but performed acts of evil at the end of their lives. And the Kinship of the Setting Moon is the place cats exist if they have done an amount of evil, but performed acts of good at the end of their lives."

"Oh," Nutmeg meowed, "but why the Kinship of the Rising Moon?"

"Do you not understand a word coming out of our mouths?" Past stood up, tail lashing. "You killed your mate, your best friend, and your son. Not only did you kill your son, but you threatened to kill him when he was a *kit*. That is unforgivable by all standards. You

should be thankful we don't just send you to non-existence now."

Nutmeg stared, unable to speak. Then she slowly nodded her head. "I understand."

"Go," ordered Future, gesturing to the right.

She obeyed and went in the direction of where Future was pointing. *Well this is going to be such a* fun *way to live out my existence.*

I'm so sorry for the long wait! I had no ideas, but now you have this. What do you think about this concept of kittypet/rogue/ loner afterlife?

Graystripe's POV

"Silverstream?" Graystripe called, slipping out of the bushes.

"I'm here," she mewed.

Silverstream's tabby fur glistened as she pulled herself out of the river. She slid to his side as though she were part fish herself. Her broad head rubbed against his sturdy gray shoulder. "Is something the matter?"

He shuffled his paws, unsure of what to say. All he wanted to do was pour out what had happened through out the past few days, but he resisted. It was already hard enough for the Clan to deal with Fireheart's death; it was harder for him even, to know he'd never see his best friend again.

Fireheart's gone, the tiny voice in his mind told him. *You'll never see him again.*

Shut up, he told it. *Fireheart believes in StarClan. That's where he is now.*

The voice wouldn't go away. *What makes you think he believes in StarClan?* it hissed.

Dread crept into his belly, making him question everything. Maybe Fireheart *doesn't* believe in their warrior ancestors. Why would he? He was born a kittypet.

Silverstream nudged him. "Graystripe?" she prompted. "What's the matter?"

Graystripe shook himself. "Fireheart's dead," he breathed. "He died not too long ago."

"I'm so sorry," his mate mewed. "Is there anything I can help with? I'm right here if you or ThunderClan need anything at any time."

"No," he meowed. "It's just hard to take in."

"I understand that," meowed Silverstream. "It's always hard to lose a Clanmate, especially if that Clanmate is close to you."

He nodded his head. "Exactly."

"He's in StarClan, though," she told him. "He has to be. Fireheart was a good warrior."

"He was." Graystripe's voice cracked. He felt an odd stirring of rage. "I doubt he's in StarClan, though. He probably didn't even believe in them anyway."

"Graystripe-"

"I mean, why would he? He was born and raised a kittypet for his entire kithood," he spat. "Longtail's right. Once a kittypet, always a kittypet."

"Graystripe!" Silverstream gasped. "Just because a cat isn't Clanborn doesn't mean they lack belief in StarClan, or they lack skills a warrior should have."

He stood up and stormed away. "You know I'm right," he growled.

Strangely enough, he felt no guilty or shame saying what he did. *I am right. Longtail is right. He always has been. I've just been too ignorant to see it.*

Graystripe felt an odd sense of pride creeping into his chest.

Once a kittypet, always a kittypet.

I hope you guys liked this chapter! I just randomly had motivation for this.

Let me know if you liked this or if you have any constructive criticism for this chapter.

I'm also really sorry it's taken me 5 months to update this. I have the end planned out, though, so it shouldn't be too long before I mark this as complete.

Bluestar's POV

A few sunrises had passed since the announcement of Fireheart's death. Forcing herself to move, Bluestar exited her den and sat in the shade of the Highrock. She scanned the Clan, feeling the solemnness of energy. She had grown used to this feeling, this air, that followed the death of a Clanmate. Her heart ached upon knowing her former apprentice is dead, but even more so when seeing Sandstorm go about her duties.

The sandy she-cat's head was lowered and her tail drooped, but never dragged on the ground. Her voice was quiet and gruff, thick with grief. Bluestar had noticed a slight swelling to Sandstorm's belly, recognizing the look of a pregnant queen. Though, her and Fireheart had spent more time together before they had left for this "mission"...

In the sunrises that went by, Bluestar had named Cinderpaw and Brackenpaw warriors - Cinderfire and Brackenfur. Cinderfire after Fireheart and Brackenfur after Frostfur. Brackenfur had been noticeably trying to cheer Cinderfire up. She had been seemingly down and less energetic than usual, which Bluestar deemed understandable.

However, she felt like she was forgetting herself. Resting her gaze on Tigerclaw and Goldenflower, a warm feeling crept into her chest. Tigerclaw gave the golden queen a swift lick to her ear before turning and grooming Tawnykit. Goldenflower did the same to Bramblekit. *That's it,* Bluestar thought.

She bunched her muscles in her hind legs before springing onto the Highrock. Most of the Clan was already gathering, but she called for the rest of the warriors. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here, beneath the Highrock, for a Clan meeting!"

Once the Clan was gathered, she began the ceremony by gazing at

the kits. Tigerclaw sat next to her on the Highrock, amber eyes shining pridefully. Tawnykit's dappled tawny fur shined in the sunlight, and Bramblekit's eyes, identical to his father's, glistened excitedly. "Tawnykit and Bramblekit," Bluestar projected, "you have both reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed."

She looked at Tawnykit. "Tawnykit, from this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Tawnypaw. Your mentor will be Brackenfur. I hope he will pass down all he knows onto you."

Turning her head to face Brackenfur, she meowed, "Brackenfur, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have received excellent training from Graystripe, and you have shown yourself to be patient and loyal. You will be Tawnypaw's mentor, and I expect you to pass on all you know to her."

Brackenfur dipped his head to the ThunderClan leader. "Thank you, Bluestar," he mewed. Touching his nose to Tawnypaw's, he told her, "I'll do as best as I can to teach you everything you need to know."

"Tawnypaw! Tawnypaw!" the Clan chanted.

The new mentor led his apprentice over to sit down. Tawnypaw watched enthusiastically while her brother received his name and mentor.

"And Bramblekit," she announced, "from this day on until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Bramblepaw. Your mentor will be Sandstorm." *An apprentice might help distract her.*

"Sandstorm," she meowed, the she-cat staring up at her, "I believe you are also ready for an apprentice. You received outstanding training from Whitestorm, and you have proven yourself to be observant and level-minded. You will be Bramblepaw's mentor, and I expect you to pass on all you know to him."

Sandstorm nodded her head, then pressed her nose to the small tabby's. "I'll do my very best," she mewed.

"Bramblepaw! Tawnypaw!" the Clan cheered, individual voices becoming one.

Bluestar let them celebrate for a little while longer before silencing them with a swish of her tail. Her sapphire-blue gaze swept across the Clan to lay on Cloudpaw. Cloudpaw sat hunched over and eyes glazed, grief clearly striking the apprentice harshly.

"There is one last order of business," Bluestar meowed. "Cloudpaw still needs a new mentor to finish his training. I've thought about it, and I have decided I will finish Cloudpaw's training."

Small gasps and murmuring rippled throughout the gathered warriors. It wasn't every day an apprentice was mentored by the Clan leader. To Bluestar, it felt *right* to finish Cloudpaw's training in Fireheart's place. Breaking the surprise, her and Tigerclaw jumped down from the Highrock to signal the end of the meeting.

Tigerclaw trotted over to Tawnypaw and Bramblepaw, touching his nose to each of theirs. His eyes sparkled with the pride Bluestar wished Pinestar had shown him. She overheard Goldenflower exclaim, "Now just because neither of you are in the nursery doesn't mean you can disobey your mentors. If I hear you disobey or disrespect them, I swear to StarClan you'll be in trouble with me too. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," Bramblepaw chirped, his sister echoing him.

Bluestar padded to the freshkill pile. She grabbed herself a sparrow and started back towards her den. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Graystripe slipping out of camp. He's been acting weird ever since Fireheart was pronounced dead. Whether it was out of grief or something else, Bluestar didn't know. All she knew is something was off and she needed to get to the bottom of it.

I've got my eye on you, Graystripe.

4 months later . . . I apologize for the long wait for the next chapter, but I've finally found an idea. I was gonna make Bramblepaw's mentor Whitestorm then remembered he's mentoring Brightpaw right out XD. Anyway, I hope you

enjoyed this chapter. And.. what do you think is going on with Sandstorm? Do you think she's expecting kits? And if she is, *who's* kits?

Sandstorm's POV

Why did they take you from me?

Sandstorm sat at Fireheart's grave, rigid. It was cruel enough for StarClan to take him from her, but to take him from his kits... That's unforgivable. She kept her sandy-ginger head lowered, paw tracing the unearthed soil.

"Sandstorm?" She looked over to shoulder to see Graystripe padding toward her. His gray fur was groomed, muscles showing under the dimming sunlight as he moved.

"What do you need?" she snapped, leaf-green eyes flaring.

Graystripe came and sat beside her. He remained expressionless, but Sandstorm thought she saw a hint of relief. *How can he be relieved?* she wondered. *Fireheart's dead, and it's as if he never cared about him.*

"A proposition?" Graystripe meowed.

She sat back, staring at him. Her chin was slightly raised, her saddened expression transforming into one of more suspicion. "What proposition?"

"I know you've never been too fond of Fireheart," he started, "and I know I've never been either. It is much better with him gone - Bluestar favored him over everyone else anyway. Now she can't with him dead. You're the only cat I could think of that may be willing to.. say.. help me?"

"How *dare* you say that!" Sandstorm shot to her paws, claws unsheathing and fury flooding through her body. "I *am* fond of him. I'm the mother of his *kits*, for StarClan's sake! And how dare you say we're better off with him dead. Sure, Bluestar may have favored him, but was it favoritism or just the love a mother would have for

her kits?"

"Now I understand you're upset, Sandstorm," Graystripe conceded.

"Upset?" she yowled. "*Upset?* I'm more than upset!"

Graystripe stood up, pinning her to the ground. He forced all his weight on top of her. Muzzle less than a mouse-length away, she could feel his warm breath against her muzzle. "Cloudpaw saw what I did," he hissed. "And I need you to lie for me. Tell Bluestar I was with you when it happened. Tell her he was just hallucinating. That grief can make you see and hear things that aren't real. Tell her I was never speaking to those rogues, or dealing with dogs."

"Rogues? Dogs?" Sandstorm questioned. "What in the name of StarClan are you talking about?"

"Surely you understand?" he asked, nodding toward a bush close to the gorge.

Inside the bush was a pair of icy blue eyes. The pair of eyes were narrowed, as if carefully watching and listening to everything that was being said. Graystripe may never get off her or leave her alone unless she agrees to lie for him. However, she can't do this. Bluestar must know the truth, no matter how much it pains any of them to hear it.

"Okay," meowed Sandstorm. "I'll do it."

Graystripe let her get up. "Good."

Once she was on her paws, she started off in the direction of ThunderClan's camp. Eventually leaving the sight of Graystripe's amber gaze, she sprinted towards the entrance. Tawnypaw came through the entrance.

"Hey, Sandstorm!" her apprentice greeted, seemingly sheepish. "When can we go hunting?"

"Later."

Upon entering the camp, Sandstorm halted. *What dogs? What rogues*

is he talking to? She knew full well Fireheart's mother wasn't a good cat, and Graystripe was talking kind of like her. She thought more about the wounds her mate received. You didn't have to be a medicine cat to notice the wounds weren't absolutely life-threatening when he received them. Even after Yellowfang's care they weren't.

Who was the last cat in the medicine cat before his death?

Sandstorm walked swiftly over to the medicine cat den. Nodding her head in greeting to Yellowfang, she approached the nest Fireheart had been in. There was faint lines of juice and blood spread throughout the nest and the underneath of it. She leaned in for a better look and smell. She recognized the scent of deathberries simply from her mother's and Spottedleaf's warnings about them.

Fireheart didn't succumb to his wounds. He was murdered. *But who did it?*

She searched for a scent, even a faint one - aside from Fireheart and Yellowfang's. When she picked one up, Sandstorm's blood ran cold with her chilling realization.

Graystripe is Fireheart's murderer.

I wanted to experiment a little bit with this side of Graystripe. Also, I had this random idea: "Hey! What if *Graystripe* killed Fireheart?" So here we are. I hope you enjoyed!

Cinderfire's POV

Sitting just outside the warriors' den, Cinderfire observed the camp. She still grieved for her fallen mentor, but had pushed herself to look forward. The sky was painted with hues of blue and orange to signify the setting sun. Her tail tapped against the ground mindlessly.

"Cinderfire." She turned her blue gaze to see Sandstorm approaching her.

"Were you with Fireheart before he died?" the sandy she-cat asked.

"Yeah, of course." Cinderfire didn't think anything of it until Sandstorm pressed her.

The older she-cat's ears twitched and her tail flicked back and forth. "Did you happen to see any other cat come in to see him?"

"Graystripe did," meowed Cinderfire. "He asked for some time with Fireheart alone, so I left."

"And then he died," Sandstorm muttered.

Cinderfire cocked her head to the side. "What?"

"Yellowfang announced that Fireheart had died right after you left and Graystripe walked in," she explained.

Her head was lowered, digging deep into her mind of what this could mean. *What is Sandstorm getting at?* After several long moments of silence, it clicked. Eyes wide, Cinderfire stared in disbelief at Sandstorm. "Graystripe killed Fireheart?"

"I don't want to believe it either," Sandstorm mewed. "But I think it's a very likely possibility."

Mind racing, millions of thoughts and questions all jumbled

together in her mouth and she couldn't get it out individually. "What makes you- but- how did-"

Sandstorm swept her tail across the smokey she-cat's mouth. "One question at a time," she suggested. "Let's go talk about this somewhere more private, hmm?"

Cinderfire followed Sandstorm out of the camp. Sandstorm lead her to the Great Oak where they sat beneath its leaves. Cinderfire waited for Sandstorm to speak for a while until it felt as though ants were crawling beneath her pelt.

"How do you know?" she blurted.

Sandstorm shifted her forepaws, kneeding the dirt. "Well . . ." she started. "I was out of camp to grieve alone and Graystripe approached me. He started talking about how it's better off with Fireheart dead, and how Cloudpaw had seen him do it." She took a breath, Cinderfire remaining silent. "He told me I needed to lie to Bluestar and tell her that Cloudpaw was just hallucinating. He'd mentioned something about dogs, but I can't remember what it was exactly.

"So I lied to him and said I would do it. When I got back to camp, I went to Yellowfang's den to search out scents in the nest Fireheart was laid in. I really don't want to believe it, but I found deathberries underneath the nest. Graystripe's scent was faint, but it was definitely there with them."

"Oh StarClan," Cinderfire breathed. "We have to tell Bluestar the truth then!"

"Not so fast," meowed Sandstorm. "I already asked Cloudpaw to tell her what he saw and that I was speaking with you, just in case you had seen anything."

Sandstorm stood up and padded back to camp. Yet Cinderfire stayed where she was for a while longer. "I have to tell Bluestar," she mumbled to herself.

Standing up, she started trotting back to camp, trying to look

nonchalant but also purposeful. A weight on her shoulders, however, sent her crashing to the ground. There was hot breathing in her ear, followed by a sinister chuckle.

"Not so fast," a voice meowed.

In a split second, she recognized the voice. *Who is that?* Before a thought could be formed, a sharp pain pierced through the back of her neck. Darkness overtook her vision, and her mind clouded.

Graystripe-

Looks like Cinderfire can'ts report her discovery to Bluestar. Whoops-

I apologize for the wait, I've finally been able to weasle my way out of some writer's block. This is definitely not my best work, but I'm happy to at least have *something* to publish.

Bluestar's POV

Bluestar sat up in her nest, contemplating what Cloudpaw had just told her. Sandstorm had come in to sit not too long ago. *How could Graystripe do this?* The gray warrior was a trusted member of her Clan, at least he still is for the majority of the Clan.

"Bluestar," Sandstorm meowed, "we need to act. Fireheart's death can't have been for nothing."

She stared at the pale she-cat. "How dare you assume such a thing." Her tail lashed. "His death will have never been for nothing. I won't ever let it be for nothing. Graystripe will be exiled."

Cloudpaw remained silent the entire time. Bluestar couldn't even imagine what the apprentice must be feeling. He lost his mentor, his only blood-relative in the Clan. He was just turning his head to follow the conversation between the two warriors, blue eyes fixated on something in the distance. There was an unfamiliar, raging grief scent wafting off him. "Cloudpaw?"

"I want Graystripe dead."

An uncomfortable silence fell, easing it's way into the den. Bluestar scanned Sandstorm's expression for any distaste of Cloudpaw's wish. She turned her gaze back to Cloudpaw. "Killing Graystripe is too far, Cloudpaw. Though I understand your anger, we need to take this a different way."

"You don't understand." Cloudpaw got to his paws. "Fireheart was the only cat I had in this Clan, the only one that understood what it's like being born a kittypet here. I didn't have anyone else and now Graystripe took that away. He's responsible, so he needs to pay the consequences."

"Cloudpaw-"

"No!" His claws slid out, scraping against the stony ground. "An eye for an eye. Graystripe killed Fireheart, so he needs to pay with his life."

Sandstorm rested her tail on the older apprentice's shoulders and guided him out of Bluestar's den, flashing the leader a knowing look. Bluestar nodded her head. She was disturbed with this newfound violence from Cloudpaw. How was Fireheart's death affecting the Clan so badly?

When she emerged from her den at dusk, her deputy Tigerclaw approached her. His usually unbreakable demeanor faltered for a moment. His amber gaze was darkened, a somber expression on his face. "What is this I hear about Graystripe murdering Fireheart?"

"Who told you?" Bluestar sat with her tail curled neatly over her paws. "This cannot spread throughout the Clan, it's not the time to bring worry before I've had time to think about this."

"Cloudpaw." Tigerclaw rested next to her, picking squirrel fur from between his claws. "What exactly do you plan to do?"

She thought for a moment before responding. "I'm going to exile him when he returns from patrolling the borders."

As if on cue, Graystripe and his patrol entered the camp. He was carrying the limp body of a young, smokey-gray she-cat. *Cinderfire.* Dread crawled through Bluestar's veins as the gray warrior approached her.

"There was nothing we could've done, Bluestar," Graystripe mewed. "She was dead when we found her."

"Leave her body here for us to mourn," Bluestar ordered.

The ThunderClan warrior did as she asked. When he walked away, Bluestar crouched down and sniffed her body, the wound on her neck. It reeked of Graystripe's scent. She didn't want to believe it, but it was undeniable. This was Graystripe's second victim.

"No one else can fall victim to him." Bluestar leaped onto the Highrock, followed by Tigerclaw.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here, beneath the Highrock, for a Clan meeting!" Her voice rang throughout the clearing, summoning all her queens, warriors, apprentices, and elders. Yellowfang and Tigerclaw took their places on either side of their leader.

When she saw Graystripe sit so politely next to Brackenfur, a rage bubbled in her stomach. "Graystripe, please step forward."

The gray warrior did as she asked, a confused look on his face, but he maintained his composure.

"I call this Clan meeting for you to acknowledge you are in the presence of a traitor," Bluestar meowed, turning her gaze back to the warrior. "Graystripe, you have murdered both Fireheart and Cinderfire. I have evidence of such, the deathberries with your scent by Fireheart, and your scent and fur left on Cinderfire's neck."

Gasps of shock and whispering erupted among the gathered Clan. "How could you do this?" Willowpelt called.

Oh, Willowpelt. The light she-cat was Graystripe's mother. The betrayal she must be feeling at that moment was unimaginable.

"Because of your treachery, I hereby declare you an exile from ThunderClan." Bluestar glared down at Graystripe coldly. "If you are caught on ThunderClan territory after moonrise, I give my warriors permission to treat you as they would a rogue."

Graystripe stared up at her, piercing amber eyes burning into Bluestar's pelt. "If this is truly what you declare, then so be it."

"It is. Now go."

"Very well, Bluestar," he hissed. "This will not be the last time you see me. Mark my words, Bluestar, I will hunt down every last member in this Clan until you are the only one left standing."

Bluestar said nothing, just simply stared at him until he left. She dismissed the meeting, remaining on the Highrock for a moment longer.

Graystripe will strike again.

I'm gonna be so fr, I had to reread everything like five times to remember the plot of the story. This is just a filler for now, at some point, probably not any time soon, I'll update again with better writing lmao

I hope you enjoyed, minnows :)